

Child Study¹

In the words of a wonderful Native Alaskan educator: “In order to teach you, I must know you. ‘I pray for all of us the strength to teach our children what they must learn and the humility and wisdom to learn from them so that we might better teach.

Lisa Delpit, Other People’s Children, p. 183

Rationale

Good teachers are always learning about their students—how they see the world, how they think, express themselves and learn. Knowing and caring about students as learners helps teachers form relationships, earn students’ regard, decide what and how to teach, assess student understanding, communicate with families about student progress.

In this investigation, (which is integrated with the Psychology of Student Learning Course, the Jewish Educator’s Seminar, and the Fundamentals of Teaching Course) you are trying to learn how one child experiences the world-- what do things look and feel like to this child, trying to see things from the child’s perspective. Your basic task is learning how to observe and think about children and about their experience of school and the world outside school. This includes being reflective about yourself as an observer and discussing your thoughts and observations with others. The careful study of one child will help you develop your capacity to discern and appreciate the abilities, needs and potential of all students and gain some new self-awareness as well. You will also use the knowledge that you gain of your study child to help you as you develop lessons for your class.

The purpose of this child study is to learn and practice the following skills:

- collecting quantitative and qualitative data that informs teaching plans and practice;
- analyzing data through systematic review and collaboration with colleagues;
- identifying a student’s unique strengths, needs, interests, learning styles, developmental level and experiences;
- reflecting on practice in relation to research on teaching and learning;
- adapting practice based on data; and
- presenting information obtained from the case study to the student, the family and colleagues in a professional manner

Getting Started

1. During the week of **September 14**, decide which student you want to study based on class discussion and your mentor teacher’s advice. You might want to choose someone who puzzles you or a quiet child who is often overlooked. Do not choose a child who you see as far outside the norm of the classroom, either academically or behaviorally. Make notes in your field notebook about why you chose this particular child to study. Decide on a **pseudonym** to use in writing and talking about your study child in order to protect his/her privacy.

¹ This investigation reflects the profound influence of Dirck Roosevelt who is spreading the tradition of child study developed at the Prospect School in Bennington, VT to teachers and teacher educators in Michigan and Massachusetts. It is also modeled on the series of assignments developed by Vivian Troen.

2. Keep a field notebook. You will be using a variety of observation methods. It is important to do observe discretely so the child does not feel singled out. When you are using objective written methods, set up your recording pages in two columns - one for what you observe and the other for your thoughts, reflections, ideas, etc. For each observation be sure to note the purpose or reason for the observation; date and time; where the observation is taking place; the duration of the observation.

Your notebook also will include descriptions of discussions with colleagues and parents; data from reports, etc.

3. Observe and collect information you think will help you understand this child and how s/he is changing over the term. In particular, try to understand how s/he is interacting with the classroom environment (people, formal and informal curriculum, materials, etc.) and how the environment is or is not responsive to the child's strengths, weaknesses, background and experience.

4. Try to observe the child alone and with others, in different settings (e.g. on the playground and in class) and in different subjects, including specials such as art, music, and P.E. Try to interact informally with the child (e.g. during transitions, at recess, on the playground, as you assist the child at his/her desk).

5. Use the headings in the Descriptive Review framework to jot down notes, anecdotes and impressions. Talk to your mentor teacher about your observations and ask for his/hers. The readings will also give you ideas about what to look for, how to get to know students, how teachers use this kind of information to inform their teaching. Keep track of ideas from readings and discussions that seem relevant to your child study so that you can draw on this in your final integrative report.

6. Keep a portfolio of the child's work. Write a brief paragraph about each piece of work you collect indicating the context in which it was produced and why you feel it is significant.

7. Remember that you are not doing research experiments on this child. Rather you are trying to learn about him/her through close observation and interaction within the constraints of time and setting. Do not discuss your study child by name outside of class.

Note:

Just as a regular teacher needs to continue teaching as she/he observes, so will you. While you may have some times set aside for focused observation, at others do not stop your classroom responsibilities to observe. Work towards being able to do both simultaneously.

Sharing and Reporting What You Are Seeing and Learning

We will form child study groups in class so that you can talk about your study child with others and learn about other children through your colleagues' eyes. Remember that you will be getting to know your study child over time. Use your group to check out your impressions, see if your

evidence is compelling, gather different perspectives on your interpretations, and get new questions to pursue.

Overview of Assignments

You will prepare four oral presentations, each with a different purpose and focus, as described below. You will also complete 3 written assignments: two short “sketches” of your child and one longer integrative report.

The guidelines for each assignment are below.

Introduction to the learner: Oral presentation and written “sketch” and analysis - Oct. 1 in Fundamentals

Mid-term update: Oral presentation and written “sketch” and analysis – Tuesday, Oct. 20 in Child Psychology

Child as a spiritual learner: Oral presentation – Thursday, Nov. 19 in JES

Bring student work to seminar: Analysis in class - Thursday, Nov. 19 in Fundamentals

Final oral presentation - Tuesday, Dec. 15 in Child Psychology

Final integrative report - Thursday, Dec. 17

General Guidelines for Written “Sketches” and Analysis

(no more than 2 pages, double spaced)

A written “sketch” of a child is a descriptive passage that allows the reader to picture the child in a vivid, detailed, and objective manner. The written sketch should be free of judgment and interpretation. See sample passages in “*Ways of Studying Children*” by Almy and Genishi. Each sketch you write should be followed by a brief analysis of the sketch. What is your interpretation of the description? What role might your feelings and/or assumptions play? What are the implications for this child and for you as this child’s teacher?

Assessment Criteria for Written Sketches and Analysis

1. Quality of description: vivid, clear language, non-judgmental
2. Quality of interpretation: plausible based on information given, assumptions and biases articulated

General Guidelines for Oral Presentations

This is an opportunity to begin pulling together your ideas and developing a nuanced portrait of your study child. We will break into small groups and spend 15 minutes on each child. First you will give an oral presentation (10 minutes). Then there will be 5 minutes for comments and questions. Each group will be joined by a faculty member.

Think of an interesting way to present your child. Your presentation should accomplish the following:

- Your listeners should be able to visualize your study child because of the detailed and vivid verbal portrait that you paint.
- Your listeners should learn something about your child as a learner and thinker and as a member of the classroom community. Have you uncovered any patterns that suggest areas of strength or concern?
- Your listeners should understand why you characterize your child in particular ways because you provide supporting evidence (anecdotes, artifacts, observations).
- Your listeners should get a sense of some of the lingering issues or questions you are working on, puzzling about.
- Use a handout or bring some visual(s) to support your presentation. Your handout should include two pieces of evidence (e.g. observation notes, quote, anecdote, student work) and 3 questions that will further your study. (No pictures of your child.). Have fun with this.

Assessment Criteria for Oral Presentations

Here are the criteria that will be used to give you feedback on your oral presentation.

1. Quality of preparation.
2. Quality of description: uses vivid descriptive language, presents rounded picture of child
3. Adequacy of supporting evidence: provide anecdotes, observations, artifacts to support claims and to illustrate key qualities; (does not rely solely on generalizations and judgments).

Specific Guidelines for Assignments (Please make sure to read general guidelines above)

Introduction to the Learner (Oct. 1)

The purpose of this initial sharing is to share your first impressions of your study child, based on your beginning evidence, and to clarify your questions and figure out what you need to learn more about. It is also a chance to practice the discipline of separating description and interpretation. **Always protect your child's privacy by using a pseudonym in writing and speaking. Do not discuss your study child outside of class.**

Your oral presentation should include the following:

- Briefly describe the setting where you are getting to know your study child.
- Say why you chose the student. What were your first impressions?
- Give a verbal portrait of your study child. (See headings 1, 2, and 3 in the Descriptive Review framework.) See how much you can remember and what you need to pay attention to in subsequent observations and interactions. What words or phrases would you use to describe your study child?
- What are three questions you already have about this child?
- What are two or three strategies you are planning to use to begin to document and record data about this child?
- Invite your peers to ask questions to help you clarify and support your first impressions.

Each person will have about 10 minutes to present with 5 minute for questions and comments from the group. After the sharing, make some notes about the hunches you now have that you want to explore further. What are some possible strategies, opportunities, openings that you could create or take advantage of to gain a more rounded picture of your study child? What else do you want to know? Why?

Your written sketch and analysis should connect in some way to at least one of the first three Descriptive Review headings. In other words, the portrait that you paint with words, as well as your analysis, should provide some insight into this child's physical presence and gesture, disposition, temperament, emotional tone, and/or relationships with peers and adults.

Mid-term Update (Oct. 20)

To prepare for the oral presentation, look through the notes that you have been keeping over the past 5 weeks. Using the Descriptive Review headings, organize the information that you have gathered in order to create a fuller picture of your study child. This time, try to pay particular attention to the fourth and fifth headings. This session will help you clarify what you know and what you would like to find out. Make sure to include the questions that you have at this point: What puzzles you about your study child? What do you wonder? What do you want to know about him or her? What seems contradictory?

Provide a handout or some visual(s) to support your presentation. No pictures of students.

Each person will have about 10 minutes to present with 5 minute for questions and comments from the group. After the sharing, make some notes about the hunches you now have that you want to explore further.

Your written sketch and analysis should connect in some way to the fourth and/or fifth Descriptive Review heading. In other words, the portrait that you paint with words, as well as your analysis, should provide some insight into this child's activities, interests, preferences, and/or modes of thinking and learning.

Analysis of Student Work (Nov. 19)

You will bring one piece of student work from your study child to seminar. Besides the selection of the work, this assignment requires no preparation. We will spend time in class analyzing it. The work can be a piece of writing, a picture, a math journal page... We will practice together on a sample of work from another child and then, in pairs, you will analyze your child's work using a protocol provided in class. This exercise will give you some insights into your child. It will also give you practice describing as concretely as possible what your child knows and can do and thinking about how, as a teacher, you could move his/her learning forward in this area.

Study Child as Spiritual Learner (Nov. 19)

This will be part of your Jewish Educator's Seminar, with Orit Kent facilitating. She will introduce the assignment on Nov. 3 (tentative).

Final Oral Presentation (Dec. 15)

This will be your final opportunity to share about your study child. Having studied this child throughout the semester, you should now be using your knowledge to enhance the child's learning in the classroom. You have recently taught your mini-unit, at least one lesson of which was planned with your study child in mind. This is an opportunity to share what you have learned about your study child and to reflect on the interaction between your study child and the mini-unit lesson, as well as other ways in which you have used your knowledge to support your study child's learning. Make sure to address:

- Your description of your study child's strengths, interests, and areas of vulnerability. (Descriptive review headings 4 and 5).
- How your planning intended to take those strengths, interests, and areas of vulnerability, as well as other knowledge you have about the child, into account.
- What happened when you implemented the lesson(s) that you planned with your study child in mind? Describe your study child's response. Were there any surprises for you? What would you do differently next time?
- Given your experience, what recommendations would you make to your mentor teacher about how to build on this child's interests and strengths and move his/her learning forward?
- How have your questions evolved? What do you continue to wonder?

Each person will have about 10-12 minutes to present with 5 minute for questions and comments from the group.

Final Integrative Report (due on Dec. 17)

Your child study integrative paper will integrate your experiences in the field, course readings from any DeLeT course, and feedback from classmates, advisors, and me as you have worked on learning about your study child.

Your report should have the following sections:

a. Reflection/connection with readings

Choose one passage from two different readings (from any course) that most informed your understanding of your study child and the process of coming to know an individual student. Include each passage. Explain why you chose each passage and what each taught you about your study child or the process, importance, challenges of getting to know individual children.

b. Description

This is the place to present a written portrait of your study child that addresses all aspects of the Descriptive Review framework as well as your child as spiritual learner. Use the Descriptive Review headings and prompts to organize this section. What is this child like? What are his/her strengths? Areas of vulnerability? Be specific in terms of the child's academic capacities within one or more specific content areas.

c. Recommendations

One important purpose of a child study is to enhance your capacity as a teacher of this child. How well do the classroom environment, culture and curriculum support this child's learning? What works well? What recommendations would you make, either to implement yourself or for your mentor teacher about how to build on this child's interests and strengths and move his/her **learning** forward? Make sure to include evidence (anecdotes, quotes, student work) to support your conclusions.

How have your questions evolved over the course of this study? What questions do you have at this point?

d. Self-assessment

How have you benefited from this investigation? What are some challenges in getting to know children well (besides time constraints)? What have you learned about yourself from doing this child study? What is the most important thing you want to remember about knowing children as you anticipate becoming a teacher?

Assessment criteria:

1. Description: rich and detailed with supporting evidence, examples, etc.
2. Interpretations: thoughtful, probing, showing curiosity, offering more than one possibility.
3. Reflections: honest, questioning, insightful
4. Writing conventions